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Debating: Was the reprieve of the Youth Justice Board a good thing?

Youth justice is a deeply politicised, volatile area of policy. It is also highly complex, straddling a range of competing and often contradictory policy areas such as health, criminal justice, education and local government. Policy changes in any of these areas can have a dramatic impact on youth justice, making it vulnerable to change from multiple directions. In the current climate of swingeing cuts and threats to major public services, the continued existence of the YJB is particularly important.

Most simply, the existence of the YJB gives youth justice a dedicated presence in central government. This allows for a focus on the implications of policy change for young people in trouble, and, crucially, ensures that youth crime is treated differently from other areas of criminal justice in policy terms. Of course, the Government promised that it would retain a specific focus on youth justice if the YJB was abolished. But it is precisely the YJB's location as an NDPB (Non Departmental Public Body), at arms length from government departments – and the civil service – which is so crucial in this context.

Firstly, it means that YJB staff understand youth justice. In other areas of government, advisers are drawn from the civil service which is deliberately structured around superficial knowledge with careers dependent on experience of a wide range of policy areas. By contrast, as an NDPB the YJB has a board of experts to advise on policy making; YJB staff are not civil servants but have backgrounds in youth justice or related areas of practice; and the YJB has been able to establish secondments to draw current YOT staff directly into the business of policy making. The effect is a closer connection between professional expertise, practice and policy than in any other area of government, and a continuity and stability of knowledge. If absorbed into the civil service, there is no question that this would quickly dissolve.

Secondly, by giving an arms-length, expert body a statutory role in advising on policy, the establishment of the YJB in effect incorporated critical, external voices into the policy process. Some of course have argued that the YJB isn't openly critical enough. Yet the YJB has to maintain a delicate balance. It can't easily be revolutionary: it is

still part of government and publicly speaking out against policy risks losing its influence entirely. However, behind the scenes it is able to campaign more quietly, advising and briefing practitioners and policy makers. Of course, the Government can choose to ignore its advice – but it must make a positive decision to do so.

The way the YJB operates may be flawed and like any government body it is right that it continues to be held up to scrutiny and criticism. Its authority is also precarious: it can easily be ignored and cut adrift by central government. But its establishment has significantly changed the central policy environment of youth justice and has introduced a buffer against the populist impulses of Whitehall, however fragile. This is not something we should give up lightly.